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THE HOUSING OF THE ENGLISH POOR.

BY THE RIGHT HON. LORD MONKSWELL.

WHEN Lord Shaftesbury had routed a strange coalition of out and out Radicals and high Tories, and persuaded the Legislature to make life tolerable in factories, he devoted himself heart and soul to another enterprise no less beneficent, and determined to impress upon Parliament the urgent necessity of so ordering the home life of the poor that for decent people the maintenance of common decency should be possible.

Accordingly on the seventh of April, 1851, while still in the House of Commons, under the title of Lord Ashley, he introduced a bill to promote the erection of lodging-houses for the poor which is known by his name. In recommending this measure to the House he drew a picture of the state of affairs he sought to remedy which fairly startled his hearers, and aroused the country.

He stated that in St. George's, Hanover Square, the richest parish in London, a return made in 1842 showed that there were 929 families occupying only one room each, and that in the poorer parts of London he had himself seen five families in one room numbering 25 persons or even more. He quoted a report of the London Fever Hospital in 1845, in which it was said that 100 men sometimes slept in a room 33½ feet long by 20 broad, and 7 feet high in the middle, the total air space for the whole hundred being no greater than was considered necessary for three in the hospital.

Again he quoted from the report of a city missionary as follows: "On my district is a house containing 8 rooms which are all let separately to individuals who furnish and re-let them. The parlor measures 18 by 10 feet. Beds are arranged on each side of the room, composed of straw, shavings, rags, etc. In this

one room slept, on the night previous to my enquiry, 27 male and female adults, 31 children, and 2 or 3 dogs." There were, he asserted, in one district alone 270 such rooms. Houses to let out, he added, "are never cleaned or ventilated; they literally swarm with vermin. It is almost impossible to breathe. Missionaries are seized with vomiting or fainting upon entering them." Another missionary said: "I have felt the vermin dropping on my hat like peas. In some of the rooms I dare not sit, or I should be at once covered."

In other towns besides London the same condition of things prevailed.

The town clerk of Morpeth reported that some lodging-houses there "have no beds, but their occupiers are packed upon the floor in rows, the head of one being close to the feet of another. Each body is placed so close to its neighbor as not to leave sufficient space on which to set a foot. The occupants are entirely naked, except rugs drawn up as far as the waist; and when to this is added that the doors and windows are carefully closed, and that there is not the least distinction of sex, but men, women, and children lie indiscriminately side by side, some faint idea may be drawn of the state of these places, and their effect upon health, morals, and decency."

At Leeds, Lord Shaftesbury instanced a lodging-house with an average of more than ten persons to each bed, and had been told there were 222 such lodging-houses within a radius of a quarter of a mile,

At Bradford the poor were accommodated to a large extent in cellar dwellings of about four yards square. There would be collected "sometimes 20 persons, some in beds, some on the floor; naked men and women together; children with the smallpox in the midst of them." It would seem, however, that at Bradford there were penalties for overcrowding, and that those penalties were occasionally enforced; for Lord Shaftesbury mentions the case of a lodging-house keeper, who, when fined for overcrowding, excused himself on the plea that he could not "let them lie in the street."

That these revelations made a deep impression on the House may readily be credited, and probably an honorable member who "asked any man whether he could have believed that such things existed in this country" expressed the feeling of the

great majority of his colleagues. It must not, however, be inferred that Lord Shaftesbury was by any means the only member of the House thoroughly conversant with the evils he denounced. An honorable member who had had the experience of service under the Board of Health—a government department—accentuated the remarks of Lord Shaftesbury, and asserted that he had been told at Wolverhampton, that within living memory all the inhabitants of a certain court had been transported twice over. This statement is somewhat obscure, but probably what the honorable member meant was that the number of persons sentenced to the old punishment of transportation during the period he referred to was equal to double the number accommodated at any one time in that court. But whatever may be the correct interpretation of his words, it is abundantly clear that the moral he intended to convey was that in his experience vice and overcrowding went hand in hand to a fearful extent.

Moreover, the Board of Health itself was familiar with the state of things laid before Parliament; for Lord Shaftesbury mentioned that the Board had examined 161 populous places, containing altogether very nearly two million inhabitants, “and he might safely say that without exception one uniform statement was made with respect to the domiciliary condition of large masses of the workpeople, that it was of one and the same disgusting character.”

Under these circumstances it does seem astounding that it should have been left to a private member to deal on his own responsibility with evils so shocking, so dangerous to the moral and physical well-being of the nation, and so thoroughly well known to an important government department.

Nor must it be supposed that opinion outside Parliament had been quiescent on this subject. There were brave men before Agamemnon, and enterprising philanthropists had turned their attention to the better housing of the poor before Lord Shaftesbury aroused the House of Commons. He himself instanced the case of a public company that had spent £23,000 in London on building new lodging-houses and adapting old ones—a company paying the respectable dividend of six per cent. Again, in Glasgow very drastic measures had been taken. On one day during the year 1846, no less than 30,000 persons were evicted from cellars, and yet we have it on the authority of the Duke of Ar-

gyll, as regards the evils of overcrowding in the great cities, that Scotland in 1851 was as bad if not worse than England.

Lord Shaftesbury's remedial proposals did not err on the side of stringency. This act did not oblige anybody to do anything. It was simply a permissive measure giving power to local authorities to erect lodging-houses, the local authorities endowed with this power in London being the Vestries. The act remained a dead letter for about forty years, except in Ireland, till the first London County Council availed themselves of its provisions as modified by subsequent acts to build an excellent model lodging-house near the slums of Drury Lane, containing an agreeable reading and recreation room to which county councillors occasionally resort, sometimes with their womankind, and administer suitable entertainment.

Lord Shaftesbury's act was followed in 1855 by the Metropolis Management Act, which effected a very important new departure. Under this act the London Vestries were assigned greater powers, the mode of their election was altered and an attempt was made to treat London outside the city as an administrative unit by the formation of a central body exercising jurisdiction over the whole metropolis, composed partly of nominees of the government and partly of persons elected by the Vestries and known as the Metropolitan Board of Works.

In 1866 a public health act was passed giving local authorities power to fix the number of inhabitants to each house, to register and inspect lodging-houses, to have them cleansed and to make sanitary by-laws. As regards this last power it was a privilege which in many quarters was by no means received with favor; indeed in Ireland some twenty years later only three towns had availed themselves of this provision. The year 1866 was also remarkable for bringing Mr. Torrens to the front as a "housing" reformer. In that year he introduced one of the acts known by his name, which on the suggestion of Mr. Gladstone was referred to a select committee, and became law in 1868. This act dealt with the demolition and construction of single houses, or small groups of houses, and unlike Lord Shaftesbury's act, applied not only to populous places, but all over the country.

Torrens' Act, however, even as amended in 1879, was seldom put in force. In London the Vestries were entrusted with its administration, but the London vestryman is not, as a rule, keen

in matters of sanitary reform, and it must be admitted that the gloomy doubts which oppressed vestrymen as to the policy of enforcing the act were not altogether without justification. The principle on which the act proceeded was that of buying out slum landlords on extravagant terms. This was a costly process, and on that account objectionable. But there was another objection behind, of a much more serious character. It was argued with great force that to buy up slum property at a fancy price was to encourage the manufacture of slums by enterprising and unscrupulous landlords, who would hasten to invest the money received from the ratepayer for the privilege of demolishing one slum in the purchase of another property which, by suitable treatment, might become equally objectionable and yield a similar profit.

In 1875 the sanitary law was consolidated and amended except as regards London, which was still left under the act of 1866, and Lord Cross (then Sir Richard) passed the first of a series of enactments relating to the housing question which bear his name. Lord Cross's acts differ from the acts passed by Mr. Torrens in that the former deal with large, and the latter with small, areas, and in Cross's acts the authority to put them in motion was the Metropolitan Board of Works and not the Vestries; but they both were subject to the same error of giving compensation on a far too liberal scale to slum landlords. Parliament was not satisfied, and in 1881 a select committee of the House of Commons was appointed to consider the working of the housing acts.

In the following year the labors of that committee resulted in the passing of yet another act—the Artisans' Dwellings Act—reducing the scale of compensation to slum owners, and in 1883 the Local Government Board bestirred itself and issued an elaborate circular dealing with sanitation. It should be mentioned that several of the housing acts authorized loans of public money on more or less favorable terms for the construction of workmen's dwellings.

But all this activity in the Legislature and in government departments did not satisfy public opinion. The press took up the question. Mr. Chamberlain in the *Fortnightly* made a valuable suggestion that was doubtless read with interest by those "who toil not neither do they spin." "The expense," he wrote, "of

making the towns habitable for the toilers who dwell therein must be thrown on the land which their toil makes valuable, and that without any effort on the part of the owners."

Public opinion, already in a restless and excited condition, was roused to enthusiasm by the appearance of a pamphlet bearing an attractive title, "*The Bitter Cry of Outcast London.*" Slumming was as fashionable a pastime as cycling is now, and not nearly as dangerous. Something, it was clear, had to be done, not because the evil was spreading, for competent observers were agreed that both overcrowding and bad sanitation were steadily on the decline, but because public opinion had outstripped the leisurely pace of the Legislature and the sanitary authorities. So Lord Salisbury moved for the appointment of a Royal Commission on the Housing of the Working Classes, and in March, 1884, Sir William Harcourt, as Home Secretary, nominated a very strong commission, of which the Prince of Wales was a working member.

This commission took a great deal of evidence as to the extent and nature of the evils to be remedied, especially in London, evidence which is worthy of attention not only as furnishing a strong case for further legislative effort, but as affording an authoritative basis of comparison between the London of 1851 and of 1884.

Bad as matters still were, the worst horrors depicted by Lord Shaftesbury had disappeared. We no longer hear of a hundred men sleeping in a room containing air space sufficient only for three. We no longer read of men, women, and children huddled together like herrings in a barrel, and children with the smallpox were not any longer condemned to take their chance and propagate their malady in these filthy and crowded stews. But still families of seven, eight, and nine persons, some of whom were adults, were found in occupation of small, dark, and damp rooms, and where grown-up sons and daughters slept in the same room, lodgers would sometimes be taken in. It was found that some houses, decent in front, had no washhouses, no backyards, and no back ventilation. In houses let out into many tenements the street door was always kept open to suit the convenience of the crowd of inmates, a circumstance abundantly taken advantage of by tramps with no habitation, who fill up the passages and staircases rather than pay fourpence for a bed at a common lodging-house,

or "doss-house" as they call it. Such intruders esteem themselves in luck to get shelter for nothing, and are known as "'Appy Dossers."

The value attached by the poor, and even by those who are not in the depths of poverty, to decent surroundings in family life is a very variable quantity. Decent lodging is not by any means universally regarded as one of the prime necessities of life. Occasionally it is relegated to quite a back seat.

An instance was given before the Commission of a family of seven persons—father, mother, two grown-up sons, and three grown-up daughters—all living in one room. With them this arrangement was a matter of choice, not necessity, for they earned between them about £7 a week—more than £350 a year—and even from a sium landlord they could no doubt have afforded to rent another room or two. Having screwed down the item of rent to an irreducible minimum, they determined to have a thoroughly good time, and this is how the witness describes their proceedings: "In the evening they would all go out to the music halls, and to the theatres. On Saturday afternoon they would take five tickets each for some omnibus or conveyance that was going into the country, and on Sunday they would go to Brighton and to other places." It is comforting to reflect that these Arcadian beings were such a united family, and always took their pleasure together as well as their naps. It is not stated whether they took in lodgers.

If the poor were not always duly impressed with the necessity of avoiding foul and overcrowded lodgings, it was equally certain that in many cases the London Vestries, and indeed other sanitary authorities throughout the kingdom, took their duties easily. It was by no means universally acknowledged that to perform the work of an inspector necessitated any expert training, common sense being, as one witness put it, quite sufficient; and we find that a man who had been "something in the jewelery trade" was considered competent to inspect drains and report upon dangerous structures. The Commission, moreover, noted with misgiving that house farmers preponderated on certain committees of certain vestries, and recommended that the administration of Lord Shaftesbury's act and of Torrens' acts should be transferred from the Vestries to the Metropolitan Board of Works—the then central authority for London. This transfer was duly effected by

the Legislature, and on the establishment in 1889 of the London County Council—that Frankenstein of the Conservative party which revealed in Conservative London an unsuspected vein of municipal radicalism—the representatives of the people presided over by Lord Rosebery took the housing question zealously in hand in all its branches.

Their efforts were immensely strengthened by the passing in 1891 of a Public Health Act for London, enabling them in default of the Vestries to execute themselves the necessary work of sanitation. Under the powers of that act and other recent legislation, particularly the Housing Act of 1890, they have cleared out and are now rebuilding a vast and unhealthy slum of 15 acres in the heart of the east end, and many other slums are being dealt with in like drastic fashion. They have built many blocks of workmen's dwellings, their model lodging house at 6d. a night is very popular, and having acquired from the government the site of Millbank prison, they are laying out part of it for workmen's dwellings.

It is disappointing to find that these operations have for the most part resulted in a considerable loss to the ratepayer. The clearing out of slums owing to the unsatisfactory state of the law, and the much more unsatisfactory state of the practice, as to compensation to owners of the property, cannot be otherwise than an expensive matter. Mr. Chamberlain complained that in Birmingham the cost of acquiring property running into millions was 70 per cent. above its market value. He considered it was the practice rather than the law that was at fault, and, indeed, it seemed impossible to persuade arbitrators not to give extravagant compensation. Lately, however, the principle of "betterment," so well known in the United States, has been sanctioned by the Legislature, and will do something to lessen the cost of doing away with slums and effecting improvements of every kind.

The Royal Commission gave some useful leads. They suggested that the slum landlord, instead of being bought out, should be kept up to his duty, that arbitrators should be prohibited from following their usual practice of assessing compensation on the increased value a property would derive from a proposed improvement, and that only such interests as an improvement necessarily interfered with need be bought up.

With these views the Legislature has had no difficulty in agreeing, but slum-clearing remains an expensive process, and the London County Council cannot be excused of waste or extravagance on that score.

As regards the erection of lodging houses and dwellings for the poor, the case is different. Lord Rowton has built two model lodging houses in no way inferior to that of the County Council, and the nightly charge is the same. The first built of the two is a commercial success, and the other bids fair to be. But the Council's lodging house is conducted at a loss to the ratepayer.

Again, there are several Artisans' Dwellings Companies that are doing business on a firm commercial basis; but most of the Council's dwellings are carried on at a loss. Councillors are, however, quite alive both to the unfairness of saddling poor ratepayers with a portion of the cost of lodging persons, some of whom are no poorer than themselves, and also to the danger of interfering with private dwelling building enterprise by rate subsidized dwellings, and, taught by the light of experience, they are narrowly scanning the cost before proceeding to commit themselves to any further schemes.

The Royal Commission made several recommendations with the object of enabling artisans' dwellings to be erected at the least possible cost. Trustees and limited owners were to be allowed to sell land for housing purposes under the market value, and it was suggested that the owners of sites of disused prisons, in some cases county justices, and in some cases the government, should be encouraged to do likewise. So far the Legislature endorsed the views of the Commission, and the powers given have been acted upon; but another and far-reaching recommendation as to the rating of vacant land has been up to the present completely shelved.

The law of rating places an artificial impediment in the way of building in large towns by decreeing that land till it is built upon shall only pay rates on its agricultural value, so that a landowner may occupy a large and very valuable plot of building land as a pleasure ground and pay hardly any rates upon it. Thus, at a small expense, a great deal of land may be kept out of the building market. The Commission recommended the adoption of the American system of assessment on capital value, consider-

ing that under that system there would be a free market in building sites, which would tend to the reduction of rent.

The difficulty of rehousing during the progress of improvement schemes, having regard to the great convenience, indeed, in some cases, the necessity of living near to one's work, was present to the Commission, which urged the importance of making rebuilding as far as possible simultaneous with the process of demolition.

Here the factor of cheap and speedy locomotion comes in and the service of trains and trams suitable to the pocket and needs of workmen is a question that an extended suffrage has brought very much to the front, and bids fair to exercise a considerable influence on the housing problem.

How that problem will ultimately be solved it is impossible to forecast with any confidence. This much however is certain—that the evils of overcrowding and bad sanitation are steadily diminishing, and will continue to diminish. The Peabody & Guinness Trusts are and have been dealing on a large scale with the housing of the poor. Their efforts are being supplemented by those of numerous public companies, some of which have imposed upon themselves a maximum limit to their dividend of 4 or 5 per cent. Local authorities are making experiments in the same direction, and it has even been proposed, perhaps with doubtful wisdom, to increase the powers of those authorities by enabling them not only, as they can do at present, to erect workmen's dwellings, but also to take upon themselves the functions of building societies, and lend money to artisans to buy their own houses.

Perhaps the most satisfactory feature of the general outlook is that the standard of living of the working classes is being raised. Lord Rowton, an expert and enthusiast on workmen's dwellings, and one of the prime movers in the administration of the Guinness Trust, finds that the demand for single-room tenements is decreasing, and that new buildings will have to be erected on more commodious lines than the old.

Many causes have no doubt contributed to this result. The crowded parts of London have now been thoroughly explored not only by the medical officer and the sanitary inspector, but by an army of philanthropists who live near the poor at Toynbee Hall and Oxford House and elsewhere; by missions started, maintained,

and begged for by the clergy of all denominations, and by nurses and sisters whose devotion to their calling is beyond all praise.

Public opinion would seem to be tending in the direction of socialism. The individualism taught by Mr. Herbert Spencer is for practical purposes as extinct as the old high Tory. Possibly some day the local authorities or the state may undertake the housing of the poor to the exclusion of every other agency. Rent for these habitations may be light, or perhaps there may be none at all. In principle there is no very enormous difference between free education and free lodging. If for the general benefit we insist on people living decently against their will, they may urge that the expense should be borne by the community for whose convenience they are reluctantly compelled to turn out of their single tenements. This may or may not be the ultimate drift of public opinion. The realization of extreme socialistic views may or may not tend to the general good. These are debatable propositions. There is, however, one socialistic delusion for which no pretence of justification can be alleged. Socialists are constantly asserting that they worship at the shrine of Liberty. There never was a greater mistake than to suppose that socialism and liberty are congenial or even possible companions. Socialism can only be enforced under a cast-iron system of despotism crushing out individual predilections in a manner repugnant to every sentiment of liberty. The advantages of socialism may outweigh the despotic terrors by which the promulgation of its edicts must in the nature of things be accompanied, but in estimating those advantages, do not let us forget the price at which they are to be bought. The great Goddess of Liberty has indeed good reason to complain, not only, as Madame Roland said on the scaffold, of the crimes that are committed in her name, but of the ignorance and impudence of even well-intentioned worshippers in her temple.

MONKSWELL.